



THE BAND OF HEATHENS

The guys in the Band of Heathens are fond of saying they became a unit by accident. But that's like saying the Big Bang was an accident. Unplanned, maybe, but hardly random. One might even argue that a kind of destiny was involved. The merger of singer/songwriters/multi-instrumentalists Ed Jurdi, Gordy Quist and Colin Brooks, with bassist Seth Whitney and drummer John Chipman, from their respective solo careers and bands may not be akin to a cosmic explosion, but their new album, *One Foot in the Ether*, offers irrefutable evidence that they were meant to be together — and have evolved into a solid entity worthy of the comparisons they receive to the Black Crowes, the Band and Little Feat.

One Foot in the Ether is the Band of Heathens' strongest work so far — and that's saying something, considering their last three releases (two live and one studio) brought the band out from relative obscurity to playing 250-plus shows a year for their rabid fan base, as well as a coveted taping for this year's 35th Anniversary season of the *Austin City Limits* television program. Their last album hit No. 1 on the Americana Music Association Radio chart, spent two months at No. 1 on the Euro-Americana Radio chart and wound up at No. 8 on the AMA's Top 100 Albums of 2008 list. That album also earned the band an Americana Music Association Honors & Awards nomination for 2009 New Emerging Artist of the Year. The group took Best New Band honors at the 2007 Austin Music Awards, shortly after their current lineup came into place as the band morphed from a side-project to a cohesive tight unit.

The bar has been set high for this release, but one listen to *One Foot in the Ether* makes apparent that the Heathens' three-front-man approach to writing and performing over the past three years has paid off in the studio. Aside from the confidence necessary to pull off releasing two live albums before releasing a studio album, it's evident that their unorthodox career strategy suits them well.

"The band doesn't like to do things safely," Quist explains about their aversion to using set lists, planned programming, or, for that matter, a planned career path. "Random and Chance might actually be named as extra band members in the liner notes somewhere."

One Foot in the Ether started out with no plans for a full-length album, but the muses felt otherwise. The band started booking short bursts of studio time in Austin while they were in town, with no producer and no expectations. The band would set up live in one room and push "record." As more and more songs started coming together, they would go back and layer other textures to the live performances to add depth to the sound. The guys say they were going for a specific sound, but letting things be loose and spontaneous were essential to capturing the essence of the band. As they went deeper into the sessions, the project went from the originally planned (or unplanned) three or four songs to 16 completed songs. "It became apparent that we had a full-length album on our hands and we started honing things down to make a cohesive album," said Jurdi.

Not given to overly detailed explanations, the Band of Heathens loosely define the sound they've achieved on *One Foot in the Ether*, simply as rock 'n' roll. While the last Heathens album may have been slightly more acoustic and swampier, this album is heavier, both thematically and sonically. It's muscular with electric guitars, Hammond organs, vintage electric pianos, and pill-bottle slides, all fine ingredients for rock 'n' roll in its purest form.

And it's all over this album, in tracks like the Gram-Parsons-meets-Neil-Young stomp "L.A. County Blues" (which pays tribute to the great writer Hunter S. Thompson), the New Orleans/Motown-influenced "Say," and the Saturday-night gospel-meetin' showstopper "Shine A Light." Then there's the back-alley sounds of "Golden Calf," which addresses the darker side of humanity with a nod to Tom Waits, the hot-off-the-floor funk of "You're Gonna Miss Me," and four-on-the-floor six-minute-plus jam "Somebody Tell the Truth." The hypnotic-sounding closing hymn, "Hey Rider," is "a call for peace, within and without," according to Brooks. The album contains one cover, the Gillian Welch/David Rawlings tune, "Look at Miss Ohio." The record echoes the greats from Dylan to Waits and Townes Van Zandt to Otis Redding, but the band is drawing from the wellspring that is American music to forge something present and immediate and new.

With a five-album record deal offer from one of the major-independent record labels on the table, the Band of Heathens opted to release *One Foot in the Ether* on their own BOH Records, just as they released their last self-titled studio album. Brooks explains, "In the current 'climate change' of the music business, nobody knows how it is going to work so we are not averse to trying things our own way and experimenting."

Notes Brooks, "We have three distinct writers/singers who share the front but make a unified sound, not unlike some bands of the late '60s and early '70s, when the music was what drove the wheel, not the tabloid pop-star personality with a great rack. Don't get me wrong; everybody loves boobs," he adds, exhibiting a bit of the band's characteristic deadpan humor. "The problem is, you can fake tits, but you can't fake soul."

No, you can't fake soul. You just know it when you hear it.

Just as the big bang may have been an accidental event propelling the universe for billions of years, perhaps the Band of Heathens can harness the energy of their happenstance meeting and keep creating timeless, vital albums like *One Foot in the Ether*.

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